



# The Golden Years:

Reimagining postmenopausal womanhood

by

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13<sup>th</sup> July 2018

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## **ABSTRACT**

This studio-based research project explores social attitudes towards postmenopausal women in contemporary western society. The investigation is driven by my ageing as a postmenopausal woman, and by the attitudes I have encountered that reinforce my observation that as women age they become less visible and valued in society. The feminist-inspired project reflects on how the derogation of postmenopausal women stems from the age-old patriarchal construct of western civilisation that reduces a woman's role to that of a child bearer, homemaker and an object of desire for men. When these functions have been fulfilled women are considered to be redundant to the needs of society and are discarded. In pursuing this research project, the plan was to explore how the language of sculpture can be used to challenge this negative view of older women.

In the project, I have used the human body as a central point of Reference. I re-employ cast-off objects and materials associated with women's lives, such as stockings and fashion accessories to produce the work. Using assemblage and simple sculptural processes such as plastering and gilding, the work produced reimages postmenopausal women. The goal is to challenge the conception of ageing as simply a process of decline, presenting it as something which opens up new possibilities. While there are allusions to the psychological distress older women experience due to the unjust way they

have been treated in society, they are also portrayed as complex, smart, adaptable, resilient, funny, wise, interesting and vital. The objective is to elicit an empathetic response, prompting the viewer to rethink their prejudicial attitude toward postmenopausal women.

The project is informed by contemporary theorists on ageing, including the feminist writers Betty Friedan, Margaret Morganroth Gullette and Linn Sandberg, who posit an alternative, positive vision of life after menopause by promoting the concept that women can achieve empowerment as they age by challenging the limited expectations of society and by embracing self-determination. The work of many women artists is also examined to provide a contextual base for both the conceptual and technical aspects of the work. Artists were selected who have produced work to challenge traditional conventions regarding the perception of older women in society, for example, Cindy Sherman's recent photographic self-portraits. Other artists were chosen to inform the experimental and experiential approach used to investigate the potential of materials to communicate ideas about the way postmenopausal women experience ageing. They include the female Surrealists Meret Oppenheim, Dorothea Tanning and Eileen Agar, as well as Louise Bourgeois, who utilised materials derived from her domestic environment in some of her works to explore ideas about the experience of womanhood by drawing inspiration from her subconscious mind.

While in recent decades the traditional subjugation of women in society has been challenged by feminists, resulting in positive changes in many

spheres of women's lives, the unjust treatment of postmenopausal women remains mainly unchallenged today. My work in this project contributes to the discourse of this complex social issue, in the hope of an eventual shift in the conventional paradigm, to see older women treated with the respect they deserve.

## Introduction

This studio-based research project explores social attitudes towards postmenopausal women in contemporary western society. In the project, I investigate how the language of sculpture can be used to challenge modern society's traditional paradigm of treating postmenopausal women unjustly. The project is inspired by the objectives of the contemporary artist, Louise Bourgeois, who once stated: "I have endeavoured during my whole lifetime as a sculptor to turn woman from object into an active subject" (Müller-Westermann 2015, p. 11). The investigation is driven by my ageing as a postmenopausal woman, the ageing of my female friends, and my mother's ageing. It is informed by attitudes I have encountered that reinforce my observation that as women age they became less visible and valued in society. The idea for the project was triggered a few years ago when, following my retirement from full-time work, I returned to university to undertake further study in fine art. One day, while examining my artwork, a young male student remarked, 'Gee, for a little older lady, you can make some pretty weird stuff!' The comment, delivered in a friendly tone as a compliment, alerted me to the fact that rather than being viewed as a fellow student I was of interest merely because of my failure to conform to stereotypical expectations of my age and gender. The incident led me to reflect on the way women experience life after menopause in modern society.

Because of the confidence acquired through life experiences, such as raising children successfully, achieving professional accomplishments or performing well in other undertakings, women in their forties enjoy an elevated position in modern society. Middle-aged women often possess a sexual allure which further enhances their social status (Holland 2004). Within a decade of their fortieth birthday, however, women experience a dramatic change in the way society regards them; as women's hormone levels drop off and they lose their physical attractiveness, their social power diminishes, and they experience discrimination and are stereotyped, stigmatised and socially excluded (Garner 2016). While men can age without having to adjust their appearance, women feel compelled to employ anti-ageing strategies to hold back the effects of time to remain relevant, because they observe that old women are seen as dull, ugly, useless and burdensome (Garner 2016). In reality, the accepted belief that postmenopausal women are inconsequential and valueless in modern society is ill-founded, considering that, as Imelda Whelehan and Joel Gwynne point out,

because the average lifespan of a western woman has all but doubled over the last century, menopause is less of an endpoint and more of a transitional stage (eds Whelehan, I & Gwynne, J 2014, p. 5).

In recent times, because of the work done by feminists to challenge ingrained opinions, some effort has been made in society to redress negative attitudes toward older women. Mature women are increasingly represented in popular culture, and women whose achievements exceed the expectations of their age group are celebrated in the mass media. However, while these

gestures have helped to lift the profile of postmenopausal women, an unfavourable perception of them remains entrenched, and older women routinely experience demeaning treatment in daily life. Evidence suggests that discriminatory attitudes occur because of the acceptance of old patriarchal views concerning the role of women in society (Baker, N 2010, Sandberg 2013). Because women have come to accept the long-standing tradition of viewing their place in society only within the limitations of their role as a child bearer, home-maker and an object of desire for men, they allow the limited perception of women to remain largely unchallenged. Another contributing factor is the pervading fear of old age in contemporary society because of its automatic alignment with death; it seems that while we all want to grow old, nobody wants to be old.

A survey of contemporary art which revealed that only a few feminist artists have generated work to challenge the long-established dismissive mindset toward postmenopausal women emphasised to me the value of this research project. The work I produce for this project will add my voice to the discussion about the unfair treatment of postmenopausal women.

The key questions underlying the project are: How can negative attitudes surrounding postmenopausal womanhood be challenged through contemporary sculptural forms? Also, how can these works contribute to a re-evaluation of postmenopausal women?



In the project, work emerges from an approach that combines an intuitive investigation of materials and processes with conscious intent. The physical and tactile process of assemblage, incorporating objects and materials associated with women's lives – such as stockings, fashion accessories, domestic furniture and other things found in the home – allows me to produce multi-layered forms to present complex ideas about women and ageing in as an engaging manner as possible. A range of strategies developed in early studio investigations provided ways to enhance the narrative of the work, including the use of alluring materials to decorate the puzzling forms I produced, with the aim of attracting the viewer close, encouraging them to engage intimately with the work to discover its meaning. The outcome of these strategies is a series of simultaneously amusing and confronting anthropomorphic forms evocative of ageing bodies. The purpose is to articulate a sense of contradiction, allowing the viewer to contemplate their own ageing while forcing them to re-examine their attitudes toward ageing postmenopausal women.

In conclusion, while I recognise that a change in negative attitudes toward postmenopausal women will not occur overnight, I hope my work will contribute to the discourse about this complex social issue in the hope of an eventual shift in the conventional paradigm, to see older women treated with the respect they deserve. The next section briefly summarises the exegesis.

## **An Outline of the Exegesis**

**Chapter One: Current Theories on Human Ageing,** provides an outline of the central ideas informing the project drawing on progressive ideas on ageing advanced by contemporary feminist theorists including Betty Friedan, Margaret Morganroth Gullette and Linn Sandberg, all of whom reject the concept of ageing after menopause as a period of automatic decline and who present an alternative, positive vision of ageing for women.

**Chapter Two: An Outline of the Field,** begins by giving a brief account of the disparaging representation of senior women prior to the twentieth century, to highlight the long-standing nature of discriminatory attitudes toward older women in society. It addresses how these conventions have been challenged by women artists such as Alice Neel, Cindy Sherman and Alice Mackler in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. I also address the work of women artists who have employed similar strategies and/or materials to mine, particularly the Surrealists such as Meret Oppenheim, Dorothea Tanning, Eileen Agar and artists Lynda Benglis and Louise Bourgeois.

**Chapter Three: Outline of my approach to studio practice,** outlines the philosophical ideas underlying my approach to studio practice as well as the two key strategies I have employed to produce artworks which challenge the negative view of postmenopausal women in society, namely: 1. Employing

retrieved discarded everyday objects and materials customarily used by women – such as items of hosiery, wardrobe accessories and pieces of furniture commonly found in the home – to produce semi-abstract sculptural assemblages; 2. Embellishment, which involves using alluring materials, including recovered discarded pieces of jewellery, imitation gems and fake gold and silver gilding foils, to embellish work to attract an audience to pose questions about the perception of value concerning postmenopausal women. This exegesis concludes with an outline of my contribution to the field.

## **CHAPTER ONE:**

### **Current Theories on Human Ageing.**

#### **Introduction**

In line with the project's objective of challenging the negative view of postmenopausal women in society today, the aim in this chapter is to outline the way prevailing theories advanced by contemporary feminist thinkers present alternative ways to conceive ageing regarding women after midlife. The ideas presented here promote the notion that postmenopausal women can become empowered as they age, by challenging old paradigms that suggest that as women age, they become weak, feeble and dependent on others. Instead, by letting go of the past to embrace the opportunities ageing brings, such as the chance to reinvent oneself and explore new horizons, women can take control of their ageing and achieve agency in old age.

#### **Current theories on human ageing**

Central to the current discourse on ageing in contemporary western societies is a critique of the traditional 'linear model of ageing as a series of inevitable ages and stages, each one grounded in a stage of biological change' (Hepworth 1999, p. 140). The argument is that this model describes ageing only as a decline, a description viewed by many contemporary theorists as a 'powerful, corrosive, negative ideology of ageing' (Hepworth 1999, p. 141). As

Malcolm Sargeant reminds us, 'society is continually making judgments about when you are too old for something – and when you are too old' (Sargeant 2011, p. 36).

Many of the progressive theories on ageing presented in this chapter can be traced to work done by the eminent feminist scholar Betty Friedan.

Friedan was among the first contemporary theorists to challenge the established view of ageing as decline, and to present an alternative conception of ageing. She once famously stated, 'ageing is not lost youth but a new stage of opportunity and strength' (Friedan 1994). Friedan drew inspiration from the writings of the early twentieth-century psychoanalytic pioneer Carl Jung, who believed that the second half of life offers the greatest potential for growth and self-realization. When developing her theory of ageing, Friedan adopted a personal approach by examining her own life and the lives of others. Friedan's objective was to understand how people experience ageing and to comprehend how society developed negative attitudes toward old people. Friedan sought to break through what she called the 'age mystique' (Friedan 1993). The result of her research was a ground-breaking book, titled *The Fountain of Age*, published in 1993, in which she defines the problem:

The image of age as inevitable decline and deterioration, I realised, was also a mystique of sorts, but one emanating not an aura of desirability, but a miasma of dread. I asked myself how this dread of age fitted or distorted reality, making age so terrifying that we have to deny its very existence. And I wondered if that dread, and the denial it breeds, was actually helping to create the 'problem' of age (Friedan 1993, p. 9).

As a result of her research, Friedan concluded that old age is simply 'another stage in life' (1993). She promoted the idea that, to be empowered in later life, people need to let go of the past and embrace the opportunities old age brings, stating, 'Life is growth. When you stop growing, you die' (Friedan 1993, p. 568). The contemporary theorist Linn Sandberg builds on Friedan's theory of ageing in her essay, 'Affirmative Old Age and the Affirmation of Difference', where she proposes a different conceptualisation of old age 'as a way of more rightfully reflecting the complex lived experience of ageing' (Sandberg 2013, p. 15). Sandberg formed her vision of old age by drawing from ideas developed by a group of thinkers called corpomaterialists who posit that the concept of two distinct sex categories is a gendered social idea posed onto a more variable, less fixed and more 'emergent nature' (Nicholas 2015, p.23). Describing the theory she terms 'affirmative old age', Sandberg writes:

Affirmative old age is a concept which goes beyond the dialectics of negation, and which affirms the specifics of ageing bodies and highlights the capacities of becoming in ageing bodies and subjectivities (2013, p. 33).

This idea is central to my work in the project, which seeks to challenge the perception of old age as the end of growth. Sandberg rejects talk of growing old as a decline because she says, 'it posits old age and the ageing body as the Other in relation to youth and midlife (that which is desirable and sought after)' (2013, p. 13). Like Friedan, she proposes that old age be viewed as a different experience of life, not better or worse than any other phase in the course of life.

Sandberg's notion of difference stems from the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze whereby 'difference is not always bound to negation but is instead understood as a prolific and productive force: positive difference' (Sandberg 2013, p. 19).

Correspondingly, in his essay, 'Images of Ageing: Cultural Representations of Later Life', the eminent gerontologist, Mike Hepworth questions the value of the 'traditional western model of human ageing as a predictable progression through a number of stages' (Hepworth, Bendelow and Williams 1997, p. 175). His examination of the role of emotions in old age leads him to query:

the culturally prescribed assumption that emotions in later life are necessarily distinctive in some way from those experienced during other periods of life (1997, p. 175).

This issue is pertinent to my project as I reflect upon the way women are treated in society as they age; once their childbearing potential is past, women are thought of as asexual, and are often criticised if they express themselves in a manner that suggests they have sexual feelings. In another vein, while men can grow older without having to adjust the way they look, ageing women are expected to reconsider their identity and dress in a more restrained manner while also maintaining the version of femininity promoted by mainstream culture. Women who express their feminine identity differently are ridiculed and treated as if they are invisible in society.

Because women have been conditioned to believe that they are valueless once they reach a certain age, many strive to maintain a youthful

appearance to remain relevant in society. In his essay, 'Rejecting the Ageing Body', Alex Dumas asserts that the anti-ageing discourse is driven by 'our present- day contempt towards bodies that fail to meet contemporary standards of performance, reliability and perfection' (ed Turner, p.378). He writes:

the deep seeded anti-aging beliefs in society are strongly connected to people's accepting of the idea that to age well is not to age at all (ed Turner, p. 376).

Assessing why women feel compelled to retain a youthful appearance, Naomi Wolf describes women's obsession with maintaining a youthful appearance as they age as being part of 'the cult of fear' (Wolf 1990 p.106). Women are more likely than men to use beauty enhancement products and procedures and to employ fashionable clothing and accessories to assist them in disguising the visible effects of ageing. Samantha Holland suggests that, despite being led to believe that looking younger is equated with happiness, women who hide their age, are trapped: 'There is nothing liberating about not being able to age' (Holland 2004, p. 13). It could be contended that the current obsession with anti-ageing stems from the same anxieties faced in early modern culture when people were repelled by the bodies of older women because they believed they were associated with disease and death; by disguising the process of ageing, people are able to avoid facing the reality of their mortality. In repudiating the inevitability of death, people deny themselves an authentic experience of life. Dumas cites the eminent gerontologist Mike Hepworth's discussion of positive



ageing, where Hepworth suggests:

We must confront the biological reality into old age if we are to establish genuinely positive attitudes toward old age and an aged population. The chief characteristics of prescriptions for positive ageing should be an ironic acceptance of the natural ending of one's life (ed Turner 2012, p. 384).

A goal in the project is to present work which offers an alternative perspective to the traditional view which regards growing old as a process to be feared and therefore, denied and hidden. My approach to ageing is, to coin a phrase: the truth will set you free! This opinion was validated when I read Simone de Beauvoir's thoughts on old age, where she describes her belief that 'old age sets an individual free from his body' (Beauvoir 1972 p.351). Margaret Morganroth Gullette, a leading researcher in the cultural studies of age, is also critical of the concept of ageing as a process of decline. Reviewing Morganroth Gullette's 1997 book, *Declining to Decline: Cultural combat and the Politics of the Midlife*, Hepworth describes how Morganroth Gullette assesses the theory of ageing as decline as 'an imaginary story of comprehensive and universal decline' (Hepworth 1999, p. 144). She argues that, if people are conditioned by society to believe they will experience ageing as decline, they will. In his review, Hepworth relates how Morganroth Gullette contends that the view of ageing as decline is a social construct imposed on people to manage ageing in society. She challenges the perspective of ageing as decline by promoting resistance and by championing the 'idea that we might escape being aged by culture' (Hepworth 1999, p. 144). As it is my intention to present work for this project that affirms

the notion of agency and individualism in old age, I fully concur with Hepworth's summary of the contribution Morganroth Gullette's book makes to the contemporary discourse on ageing. Hepworth states:

Once we are able to see that a life course orientated around a relentless process of decline is imaginary, that the biological changes associated with ageing do not inevitably produce universal and inescapable decline, then not simply one but a wide range of alternative visions become possible (1999, p. 144).

This view is also subscribed to by Gene Cohen, a highly respected researcher on ageing who has a specific interest in examining how the brain ages. In an essay titled, 'The Myth of the Midlife Crisis', Cohen informs us that: 'The brain is like the foundation of a building – it provides the physical substrate of our minds, our personalities and our sense of self' (Cohen 2006). Drawing from studies he conducted, and pointing to recent neuroscientific discoveries showing that the ageing brain is far more flexible and adaptable than was previously thought, Cohen promotes the idea that the second half of life offers an opportunity for individuals to unlock their creative potential, saying:

Our brain is capable of adapting, growing and becoming more complex and integrated with age. As our brains mature and evolve, so do our knowledge, our emotions and our expressive abilities (Cohen 2006).

Cohen challenges the traditional attitude toward ageing by saying,

ageing is not about managing decline. It's about harnessing the enormous potential that each of us has for growth, love and happiness' (Cohen 2006).

Similarly, in their book, *Ageing, Corporeality, and Embodiment*, Chris Gilleard and Paul Higgs question the description of ageing as an automatic

decline. However, they do not embrace the idea that empowerment in old age is achieved by letting go of the past, nor do they accept the concept that old age is just a different stage in life. Instead, Gilleard and Higgs adopt a more pragmatic approach. They advance the idea that ageing can be fought by remaining active, autonomous and in control. When speaking about the capacity of ageing to diminish the lives of older people by stripping them of their social identity, the position taken by Gilleard and Higgs is in line with that of Sandberg, Hepworth and Morganroth Gullette. They state: 'bodies are not predestined to get worse once a particular age is reached' (2013, p. 115). They promote body maintenance to 'resist one's identity and lifestyle being taken over by age' (2013, p. 115). This concept was first proposed by the Roman philosopher Marcus Tullius Cicero in 44 B.C., when, in an essay titled 'On Old Age', he stated: 'we must fight against old age ... We must compensate for its drawbacks by constant care and attend to its defects as if it were a disease' (Cicero & Freeman 2016, p. 73). Likewise, Gilleard & Higgs posit that, rather than being an act of vanity as is often suggested, maintaining a youthful body through exercise and other health regimes in old age, rather than being an act of vanity as is often suggested, 'reflects the extension of youthful values of choice, autonomy, self-expression, and pleasure' (2013, p. 165).

In her essay, 'Fiction or Polemic? Transcending the Ageing Body in Popular Women's Fiction', Imelda Whelehan reflects on the way popular

literature represents ageing women in 'only a few reductive stereotypes of the ageing woman' (eds Whelehan & Gwynne 2014, p. 43), a representation providing little direction for postmenopausal women to, in Betty Friedan's words:

break through the cocoon of our illusionary youth and risk a new stage in life, where there are no prescribed role models to follow, no guide posts, no rigid rules, or visible rewards, to step out into the true existential unknown of these new years of life now open to us (p. 43).

Whelehan's insightful essay highlights the fact that, despite significant progress in the development of a positive ideology of ageing, the prevailing attitude in society is that older women are outdated and irrelevant. The assemblage sculptures I generate for the project are intended to direct the viewer to reflect upon their attitudes toward postmenopausal women, prompting a rethink of the negative perception of them. I also aim to lead women to question their acceptance of the limited conception of postmenopausal womanhood promoted in society and to imagine an alternative vision of ageing after midlife. In the next chapter of this exegesis I examine how postmenopausal women have been portrayed in the past in western visual culture and how these perceptions have begun to be challenged in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

## **Chapter Two:**

### **An Outline of the Field.**

#### **Part One: Past Traditions**

Through my research I have noted that there are comparatively few images representing older women in Western culture, and many of the portrayals that have been generated show ageing women disparagingly. The view that old women are repugnant has a long history. In Europe during the fifteenth and sixteenth-century, for example, the dramatic transformations that took place in women's bodies as they aged provoked loathing and suspicion. In his book, *Plain Ugly: The Unattractive Body in Early Modern Culture*, Nigel Baker writes: 'The ageing woman in both visual and literary texts is often depicted as a transgressive figure, possessing threatening powers' (Baker 2010, p. 108). Baker also informs us that ageing women were routinely represented as ugly in early modern culture. He writes: 'early modern visual arts tended to reproduce stereotypical patterns of female ugliness' (2010, p. 99). For example, in the painting, *An Old Woman* (fig.1), also known as *The Ugly Duchess*, Quinten Massys drew explicitly from Leonardo da Vinci's drawings of grotesque figures to produce his demeaning portrayal of an old woman who has attempted to present herself in a youthful manner.



Figure. 1, Quinten Massys, *An Old Woman, (The Ugly Duchess)*, 1513, oil on oak, 62.4 x 45.5 cm.

Baker continues the discourse by disclosing the fact that:

the unappealing physical image of older women during early modern times was perceived to be a sign of a corrupt nature. And as a result, old women were portrayed as menacing, devious and untrustworthy (2010, p. 108).

Albrecht Durer's 1507 painting, *Old Woman with a Bag of Coins (Greed)* (fig. 2), supports this view. Durer's aim was to draw attention to the way money influences people's lives. In the invidious picture, the old woman holding a bag of coins has one saggy breast exposed. Durer's intention was to suggest that her life is motivated by acquiring wealth. The bag of coins is her baby. She feeds it, and it repays her (Victor, 2013).



Figure. 2, Albrecht Durer, *Old Woman with a Bag of Coins (Greed)*, 1507, oil on lime wood, 29 x 35 cm.

In 1539, the Northern Renaissance painter Hans Baldung Grien produced a disturbing portrayal of women and ageing. His allegorical work was produced to act as an unsettling reminder of our mortality. The painting, titled *The Three Ages and Death* (fig. 3). shows three women and a baby girl in a landscape setting. In the work, Grien's purpose was to represent three life stages – birth, youth and middle age, and death. The only figure portrayed wearing clothing is the youngest woman. However, the garment she wears is loose and slipping from her body suggesting that her potency will be short-lived. Beside her stands an ageing figure who represents mid-life. She clutches the clothing of the younger woman as though she is desperately trying to cling onto the past. Through this gesture, Grien appears to be suggesting that the ageing process is one of loss and regret (Baker 2010, pp. 99- 113). The figure portraying old age is

perhaps the most disturbing aspect of the picture. 'Rather than a period of life in itself, old age is equated with the moment of death' (Baker 2010, p. 111).



Figure. 3, Hans Baldung Grien, *The Three Ages and Death*, 1539, oil on canvas, 151 cm x 61 cm.

Because the transmutable nature of female bodies was not understood during early modern times, the physical changes that took place as women aged were misinterpreted, and senior women were often aligned with a fear of disease and death. While this partly explains why these images were produced, the portrayal of old women as ugly during early modern culture was



also a strategy employed by men to appease their anxieties regarding mortality. The depiction of senior women in an unfavourable light led them to be rejected by society, allowing men to maintain a superior position (Baker 2010).

### **Part Two: Out with the old, in with the new**

In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, several contemporary female artists have challenged these traditions including Alice Neel, Cindy Sherman and Alice Mackler.



PLATE 72 • *Self-Portrait*

Figure. 4, Alice Neel, *Self-Portrait Seated in a Chair*, 1980, oil on canvas, 135.3 x 101 x 2.5cm.

In a career that began in the nineteen-seventies, the American artist Alice Neel snubbed society's traditional representation of women by creating images that show the diversity of female embodiment. In her paintings, Neel aimed to portray the experience of being a real woman, not the type the masculine world prescribes. In 1980, in her eightieth year of life, Neel presented femininity in a new way by painting a self-portrait showing the naked body of a senior woman, thus challenging the way femininity has been idealised for centuries in western art. A woman painting a nude self-portrait was unheard of at that time, let alone a woman portraying herself naked as she neared the end of her life (Neel died four years after completing the work). Through the painting, titled *Self-portrait Seated in a Chair*, (fig. 4), Neel intended to challenge the social norm of what was acceptable to be depicted in art. The picture shows her seated naked in a chair, wearing only her glasses and holding the tools of her profession, a paintbrush and a rag. She has portrayed herself as the exact opposite of a poster girl, truthfully showing her age by painting her fluffy grey hair, saggy breasts, and folds of untanned flesh. Neel's provocative image informs my work in this project because it prompts viewers to consider their attitudes toward the ageing female body. The next artist I discuss also uses her own body as a subject to pose questions about the way society requires older women to conform to stereotypical codes of behaviour and dress.



Figure. 5, Cindy Sherman, *Untitled # 470* chromogenic colour print and ornate frame, 2008, dimensions: 7' 3 1/8" x 71 1/2" (219.4 x 181.6 cm).

Through her photographic self-portraits, Cindy Sherman intends to comment on the way women's identities are shaped by fabricated images presented as real in the mass media. While her work is not politically motivated it has a strong feminist undercurrent:

Her role as both subject (and object) and producer of images of women put her in the unique position of enacting the traditionally male viewpoint of the photographer while undermining it (Respini 2012, p. 29).

To expose the masquerade of contrived womanhood presented in mainstream

media, Sherman masks her true identity, using a range of costumes, wigs, makeup techniques, accessories, props and even prosthetic body parts. During her career, she has transformed herself into women of all ages and from different sections of society before taking photographs that mimic those presented in popular media. Her large-scale images both amuse and disturb, challenging the way women are constantly bombarded with stereotypical images of beauty causing them to feel compelled to alter their appearance in order to gain social acceptance.



Figure. 6, Bernado Strozzi, *Vanitas, (The Old Coquette)*, 1637, oil on canvas, 135 x 109 cm.

In 2008, at fifty-four years of age, Sherman produced a series of large format images in which she 'reintroduces older women back into visual culture' (Respini 2012, p. 27). Sherman may have drawn inspiration from Bernado Strozzi's 1637 painting known as the *Vanitas* or *Old Coquette* (fig. 6),

which depicts an old woman seated before a mirror

trying to look beautiful, using the surrounding wealth and luxury to pamper vanity. But the image of a beautiful, rich woman grooming herself is ruptured, for the body depicted is covered with the markings of age (Kampmann p. 284).

Sherman's works, which depict mature women drawn from the upper echelons of American society, reveal women attempting to preserve their social creditability as they age by fashioning an identity to promote their social status and to project the idea that they are self-confident and relevant. A picture in the series, *Untitled 470* (fig. 5), shows an immaculately groomed older woman in a fashionable red dress, posing at the entrance of her castle-like home with what appears to be an unflappable self-assurance. However, a closer inspection reveals that all is not what it seems. Behind the exterior façade she has constructed to promote her wealth and social status there is a vulnerable postmenopausal woman desperately trying to hold onto the remnants of her lost youth. The psychological power of the picture is driven by the many small details Sherman provides to expose her character's attempt to construct a younger appearance. The initial impact of the red dress wanes as the viewer notes her dark coloured wig she is wearing and her luminous, full-bodied, red lips – lips which are clearly the result of lip augmentation, because they look out of place on her ageing face where too much makeup has been applied to mask the effects of ageing has on human skin. Also, the unnaturally smooth skin around her eyes, suggests a botched cosmetic surgery; the skin is stretched too

tightly, causing her eyes to look strangely misshapen. And, the way she has outlined her eyes with black eyeliner and drawn-on eyebrows make her look like a weird doll, exposing her defencelessness. The efforts made to construct a convincing illusion of youth have failed because the beautiful accessories she has employed to build the narrative – a hand decorated fan and a pair of exotic gold earrings – reveal her lie by drawing attention to her ageing hands and the 'gooseneck' lines on her neck which are characteristic of older bodies. Sherman produced this series to show how women fail to achieve the 'impossible standards of beauty that prevail in our youth – and status-obsessed culture' (Respini 2012 p. 47).



Figure. 7, Alice Mackler, *untitled*, glazed ceramic figurine, 2013, 12 x 8 x 6 inches.



Figure. 8, Alice Mackler, 2013, aged 82 at her first one-person show.

The American octogenarian sculptor Alice Mackler (fig. 8) is inspirational to my work on older women, having had her first one-person show, for which she received rave reviews, at eighty-two years of age. Mackler creates ceramic figurines by working intuitively, applying little pats of clay to build textured female figures with distorted bodies. Inspired by her own image, she works instinctively, injecting her sculptures with a joyful and humorous celebration of female sexuality, thus challenging the idea that senior women are void of sexual feelings. Her engaging sculpture, *Untitled*, (fig. 7), radiates subversive ambiguity because it also resembles a phallus. The self-portrait has an attenuated head with a rounded hat or hairdo and a bulging, misshapen body. The simple technique Mackler employed to make the work gives it a superficial crudeness that contradicts her astute observation of female body language; she has built the work so that the figure leans, evoking ideas

about the instability of ageing bodies and adding an element of surprise which gives the piece an enigmatic quality. Intensifying this effect is the face of the sculpture, which conveys a mysterious aura elicited by big red lips and large green eyes that appear to be casting a sneaky sideways glance. Utilising a well-honed understanding of the expressive power of colour, Mackler has decorated her figurine using vibrant, energising hues. Mackler's figurines recall ideas of ancient fertility symbols such as the Venus of Willendorf.

### **Part Three: Assemblage**

In my work for this project, I make symbolic use of materials and found objects derived from the domestic sphere, producing enigmatic and amusing forms that evoke the inner feelings of postmenopausal women. In this respect, I have taken inspiration from the work of a number of female Surrealist artists who work with assemblage to imbue found objects with new meanings which allude to unconscious fears and desires.

The artistic strategies employed by women surrealists involved shifting the attention from 'object to process, from ontology of being to one of becoming' (Allmer 2010, pp. 26-27), and thus thinking beyond the already known. Having been denied a formal training in the fine arts, women surrealists drew upon the handicrafts taught to them as young girls, as well as their interests in fashion trends, to produce artworks using everyday materials including personal items such as clothing, jewellery, bric-a-brac and household objects, melding these materials together to create something new. The unique



methods and personal nature of the materials utilised by women surrealists resulted in work that is intriguing and amusing and which often has an erotic undercurrent. More importantly, it allowed women surrealists to generate objects which, as Allmer describes:

deconstruct the paths of Western patriarchal binary thought, its hierarchal structure, replacing stability with flux, singularity with multiplicity, separation with transgression, and being with becoming and transformation (Allmer 2010 p. 12).



Figure. 9, Meret Oppenheim, *Ma Gouvernante - My Nurse - Mein Kindermädchen*, 1936, replica 1967, assembled objects, 14 x 33 x 21 cm (5 1/2 x 13 x 8 1/4 in.).

This aspect of my work is informed by an intriguing and witty assemblage produced by the surrealist Meret Oppenheim, titled *My Nurse*. (fig. 9). Oppenheim produced the work by trussing a pair of her shoes together to symbolise women's bodies and placing them on a serving platter to evoke the

idea of a roast chicken. While the intriguing and amusing assemblage brings to mind thoughts of fetishism and bondage, it is also a subversive work generated to challenge the tradition of thinking of women as objects for the pleasure of men. Through the work, Oppenheim intended to raise awareness about the sexual abuse of women; the work was inspired by the abuse of mentally ill women by male interns at a well-known mental asylum in Paris during the 1920's (Isaak 1996, p. 192).



Figure. 10. Eileen Agar, *Angel of Anarchy*, 1939, assemblage of plaster, fabric, shells, beads, diamante stones and other materials, object: 570 x 460 x 317 mm.

Another example is the enigmatic sculptural work produced by the British Surrealist Eileen Agar, titled *Angel of Anarchy* (fig. 10). The angel, as Allmer points out, 'is a symbol of hybridity and becoming which faces and reshapes history and tradition, in the artist's own image' (Allmer 2010, p. 26).

Agar's work was made using a plaster cast of the modelled head and bust of her fiancé, the writer Joseph Bard. She wrapped the bust with African bark cloth and then ornamented the head with objects associated with femininity such as embroidered silk fabric, sea shells, osprey and ostrich feathers, African beads and diamante stones. Some of the objects have been arranged to suggest facial features while others act simply as decorative elements in the work. The result is an ambiguous mask-like object that evokes ideas of both submissiveness and seduction. The piece addresses issues of gender identity by 'enacting a man's becoming-woman' (Allmer 2010, p. 26).



Figure. 11. Dorothea Tanning, *Rainy-Day Canape*, 1970, tweed, upholstered wood sofa, wool, ping-pong balls, and cardboard 32 1/4 x 68 1/2 x 43 1/4 in.

Another of the female Surrealists, Dorothea Tanning, produced a number of works where the rebellion of the body was a recurring theme, and in 1970 when she was in her sixties, she produced a feminist-inspired sculpture

titled *Rainy Day Canape* (fig. 11). The work consists of an abstract biomorphic form evocative of a female body that appears to be transforming as it grows out of a domestic couch. Tanning made the sculpture with tweed fabrics that she stitched and stuffed with soft fibres and ping-pong balls. Her subversive work is inspirational to my project because of the way she has utilised materials and processes associated with the home to generate a sculptural work to challenge the traditional limiting attitude that a woman's place is in the domestic domain. In my work, I use objects, materials and processes usually associated with women and the home to reference the fact that the private, domestic sphere has historically been the domain of women. Another reason is to allude to the inner world of women and also to challenge how society expects women to express their femininity in ways to suit the needs of men. For example, after menopause, women are expected to dress down. Through my work, I intend to promote the idea that postmenopausal women can challenge conventional expectations by reinventing themselves as they age.



Figure. 12, Lynda Benglis, *Minos*, 1979, wall piece, chicken wire, plaster, gesso, oil-based sizing and gold leaf, 86.4 x 27.9 x 15.2 cm.

Because my work for this project emerges from an exploration of unconventional materials and an interest in developing novel working methods, I am drawn to the processed-oriented art of Lynda Benglis. During her long career, Benglis has worked in innovative ways with diverse materials including plaster, rubber, beeswax, polyurethane, cloth, bronze, ceramics and glass, generating abstract sculptures which explore the physicality of form and how it affects the viewer. Early in her career, Benglis's work was overlooked by the male-dominated art establishment in favour of work produced by her male peers. As a result, throughout her long career, Benglis has presented work to question the art world's favouritism toward male artists. The ambiguous forms Benglis generates to confront the perceived differences between men and

women in society inspire the feminist objective of my project where I produce perplexing assemblage sculptures to challenge the discrimination of postmenopausal women in contemporary society. In her work, Benglis favours elongated cylindrical shapes because these forms evoke ideas of both penises and vaginas (considered as tubes, one becomes the other) (Artnet 2017). And she also uses colours in such a way to challenge the notion that colours can be read as specifically masculine or feminine. Benglis's wall piece, titled *Minos* (fig. 12) is typical of her work from the late 1970's, when she produced forms by fusing cotton bunting dipped in plaster with shapes made by manipulating chicken wire. A coating of gesso was then applied to the dried pieces, followed by a coat of oil-based sizing and gold leaf. The resulting work has a luminous appearance and the illusion of fragility. Inspired by Benglis's use of gold leaf, I embellish the visceral, abstract plaster forms I produce by gilding them with metallic gold foil. Like Benglis, my objective is to highlight the shape of the work, to engage the viewer and prompt them to question the way they see things. In her work, *Minos*, Benglis's exploration of everyday materials has resulted in an elegant form evocative of a female figure, and while the gold leaf coating evokes ideas of human skin, the interpretation of *Minos* is open-ended because she has not given the sculpture a literal meaning. Her use of gilding has inspired my use of gold foils to embellish the unattractive forms I generate by dipping women's stockings in liquid plaster.

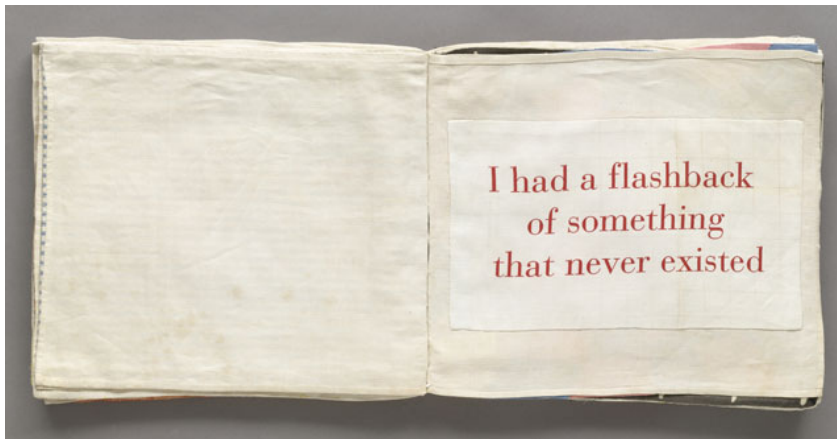


Figure. 13, Louise Bourgeois, *I Had a Flashback of Something that Never Existed*, from "Ode à l'oubli" (*Ode to Forgetting*), 2004, hand stitched fabric book.

Most influential for this project has been the work of Louise Bourgeois, who produced many works by repurposing personal items to express psychological ideas. When she was no longer able to make artwork that required physical strength, Bourgeois remained adaptable and flexible in seeking alternative ways to generate work, challenging the traditional belief that old women are feeble and useless. In 2004, she produced a fabric book titled, *Ode To Forgetting* (fig. 13). In the book, Bourgeois explored themes such as memory, intimacy and frailty (Coxon 2010). To generate the work, Bourgeois ingeniously employed redundant clothes and household linen as materials, employing domestic stitching crafts metaphorically to repair and restore her memories. Because the items Bourgeois selected for the project held the stains, marks, and injuries carried over their lifetime, evoking their pasts, they provided her with an authentic way to reference her personal history (Phillips, 2017). Likewise, I utilise real objects in my work to allow the viewer to connect the work with their lived reality.



Figure. 14, Louise Bourgeois, *Echo IX*, 2007, recycled clothing, bronze painted white and steel base, 109.2 x 67.3 x 60.9 cm.

In 2007, using items of her clothing that she no longer required, Bourgeois generated a series of sculptural works titled *Echo* in which she examined the constructs of female identity. In the emotionally charged work from the series *Echo IX* (fig. 14), Bourgeois reconfigured pieces of clothing by hand-stitching them together to create a bulbous figurative-like form evocative of an older body 'weighed down by gravity and the burden of time' (Coxon 2010, p. 81). While Bourgeois' powerful work, produced just three years before her death, represents her need to assess her life by casting off what she no longer required, it also appears to be a way of 'confronting the experience of being trapped in an ageing body' (Coxon p. 81). The work, which is cast in bronze and painted white, giving it 'a ghostly appearance' (Coxon p. 81), informs



my work in this project where I utilise women's stockings and lightweight materials to construct soft sculptures before immersing them in a bath of liquid plaster, producing hollow forms with a hard, outer shell evocative of the female body.

Drawing ideas from the work of other women artists who produce diverse work which subverts accepted social conventions regarding the role of women in society has inspired and informed my intention to develop a unique body of work which challenges negative attitudes toward postmenopausal women. In the next chapter, I describe the strategies I have employed to generate the work for this project.

## **Chapter Three:**

### **Outline of my approach to studio practice.**

#### **Introduction**

This chapter presents a discussion of the philosophical ideas underlying my approach to studio practice, as well as the various processes and strategies I employ to generate assemblage sculptures to challenge old paradigms about women as they age after menopause. In my practice, I see myself as a conduit through which ideas, formed internally throughout my life, find expression through artworks. I use a working methodology that combines collaboration between conscious intent and the unpredictability of materials, which places my work within a materialist context. As explained by Estelle Barret and Barbara Bolt, a materialist approach to creative production is one in which there is 'no opposition between inside and outside: consciousness and materiality are mutually constitutive, enfolded and emergent' (Barrett & Bolt 2014 p. 72). The reason I use methods of intuitive enquiry is best summed up by the artist Dale Frank, who in a recent interview, reflected on his belief that artwork has an independent life:

Artworks tend to be more interested in pointing out how they exist, act and live beyond the realms of human perception; a paradox of sorts given the contrived nature of artworks (Gouriotis 2018).

New ways of thinking about matter have emerged in recent decades as

philosophers and theorists seek conceptualisations of matter that reflect a growing awareness that the belief that 'the world is a passive resource for use by active humans is no longer sustainable' (Barret & Bolt 2013 p.3). At the centre of this shift in thinking about materials is a 'concern with agential matter' (Barret & Bolt 2013 p.3). Contemporary thinkers posit that, rather than being passive, matter is an active principle having agency. In a recent interview, the eminent quantum physicist and feminist theorist Karen Barad spoke of her belief that

feeling, desiring and experiencing are not singular characteristics or capacities of human consciousness. Matter feels, converses, suffers, desires, yearns and remembers (Dolphijn & van der Tuin p.59).

The instinctive working methods I employ to generate work for the project assist me to turn objects into subjects that speak to the viewer about the way women experience ageing after menopause today. The aim of this collaborative approach with my selected materials is to provide the viewer with an encounter that allows mutual agency. As Barad declares:

Agency is about possibilities for worldly re-configurings. So, agency is not something possessed by humans, or non-humans for that matter. It is an enactment. And it enlists, if you will, "non-humans" as well as "humans" (Dolphijn & van der Tuin p.55).

The feminist aspirations of my work in the project are affirmed by Barad's assertion that

agency is about response-ability, about the possibility of mutual response, which is not to deny but to attend to power imbalances (Dolphijn & van der Tuin p.59).

In studio work for the project, I explore the potential of materials in generating artwork to engage the viewer in a reciprocal exchange with the subject. The idea of a shared exchange is informed by the concept of the 'matrixial gaze' developed by the feminist artist and theorist Bracha L. Ettinger. Ettinger conceived the idea of a matrixial gaze to counter Freud and Lacan's notion of the male gaze where the subject is superior to the object. Ettinger asserts that 'a Matrix is a symbol of more-than-one' (Ettinger 1992), and a matrixial gaze is created 'not by rejecting the phallic meaning in artwork but by creating a shared sphere' (Ettinger 1992). Adopting this concept, I incorporate ambiguous elements evocative of human bodies transformed by time in the work. The objective is to dissolve the boundary between the object and the subject, to allow an open and fluid exchange to occur between the work and the viewer who 'permits the transference of meanings in a non-cognitive mode of knowledge' (Powell 2011). Ettinger adds, 'the Matrix deals with the possibility of recognising the other in his/her otherness, difference and unknown-ness' (Ettinger 1992). Generating a matrixial gaze allows the viewer to encounter the work by tapping into a prenatal zone where sexual identification is still fluid. Putting it in a nutshell, Ettinger says; 'One can picture the Matrix as a meeting place between the most intimate and the unknown, modelled on the prenatal situation' (Ettinger 1992). To summarise, the objective of the project is to utilise various artistic processes to transform objects into visceral and alluring forms capable of engaging the viewer in an intimate encounter with the subject. Through a

mutual exchange, I hope viewers will form an empathetic response to the subject, leading them to conceive of new ways of thinking about ageing as it relates to women after menopause.

The two critical processes used to generate multi-layered forms aimed at engaging the viewer in a shared dialogue with the subject are outlined under sub-headings below.

### **Strategy 1: Assembling found and hand-made objects and materials**

Unlike the assemblage works produced by Dada artist Marcel Duchamp which were constructed with objects taken from daily life and transformed into art through artistic selection, I build assemblage works by utilising a mixture of found and made objects. The materials chosen for the project speak to me and for me as a postmenopausal woman.

Real things jettisoned by women as they age are collected from second-hand stores and used in the work to challenge the way women, as they grow old, are discarded by society because they are no longer considered to be useful. By placing materials commonly found in the private sphere – such as items of used clothing, recovered wardrobe accessories and parts of domestic appliances – in an art context, I aim to give them new purpose and meanings which challenge prejudicial attitudes toward older women, particularly the idea that as women age, they should retreat back into the domestic sphere. For example, in several works, pieces of hosing from a washing machine, a material traditionally

associated with domestic servitude, take on the role of a conduit to suggest that postmenopausal women can expand beyond the limitations prescribed for them in our patriarchal society.

Additionally, time-worn objects and materials, infused with their own biographical history, are utilised to provide a way to evoke different periods, thus strengthening the ageing narrative in the work. In line with the objective of the project to reimage postmenopausal women as beautiful and valuable, these objects suggest reciprocity between the transforming female body post menopause and the way objects become beautiful as they age. The idea that objects have their own psychic power and potential correlation with the human body was understood by Marcel Duchamp, who is recognised for his use of readymade objects that 'call the body into new ways of being, a set of objects at a liminal threshold between being a commodity and being something else' (Molesworth p. 198). The inbuilt anthropomorphic features of selected items of furniture are employed in my work for their potential to communicate ideas about the physical and psychological aspects of human ageing. In the work, a cabinet with thin, knobbly and lopsided legs is used because it summons notions of the physical frailty which accompanies old age, and a table that has suffered damage during its lifetime is used to evoke thoughts about the internal world of older women cast aside by society. The pieces of furniture also act as a display strategy. In an exhibition setting, items of furniture mostly painted white provide an aesthetic and contextual link between the individual

sculptures.

The various objects selected for their potential to communicate ideas about the experience of ageing for postmenopausal women, including women's nylon stockings, remain discernible in the work, alerting the viewer to the transformation of functional things into art. Also, alluring materials such as reclaimed items of women's jewellery and swathes of red netting are incorporated in the work to elicit notions of women actively thwarting the traditional patriarchal gaze.

Different processes are employed to transform chosen objects and materials allowing me to generate many small details to serve as a pathway to more profound truths in the work. Methods used include assemblage, juxtaposition, making soft forms, immersing soft forms in liquid plaster, embellishing objects by gilding them with metallic foils, and encrusting objects with imitation gems.

While one aim is to capture and retain a haptic sense of the fragility and transient nature of human physical existence, another goal is to restore power to post-menopausal women, and the potential for new growth. I seek to marry these contradictory notions by embellishing visceral, tactile forms suggestive of women's bodies transformed by time with alluring materials such as golden coloured metal foils.

## **Strategy 2: Embellishment**

In the project, 'embellishment' refers to the way women use makeup and wardrobe accessories to enhance their appearance to attract the male gaze. It also describes the different methods of ornamentation I employ to decorate the sculptural forms I produce, such as gilding objects with fake gold leaf and encrusting forms with imitation gems. I use these materials seeking to generate an alluring feminine image to engage the viewer, but not in a voyeuristic way. Instead, my goal is to subvert expectations. Turning the object into a subject, I use embellishment to reimage female bodies transformed by time, presenting them as attractive and valuable in an attempt to persuade the viewer to reconsider their perception of beauty and value concerning ageing female bodies.

## **1. Assembling found and hand-made objects and materials**

### **1a. Making forms to evoke the physicality of the human body**





Figure. 15, Janine Miller, experimental works, 2017, nylon stockings, balloons, polystyrene shapes, soft fibre-fill, liquid plaster, dimensions variable, photo by the artist.

The primary found material used to generate work for the project is women's nylon stockings. Because these items of hosiery can mask flaws on the surface of human skin, add colour to legs and reshape the contour of flesh, women use them as a means to enhance their appearance to attract the male gaze. In my work I give these items a new purpose, to draw attention to the way postmenopausal women are rejected because they are no longer appealing to men. I began the investigation by filling women's stockings with lightweight objects, such as inflated balloons, polystyrene balls and soft synthetic fibre, before immersing them in a bath of liquid plaster. The resulting plaster-soaked forms were then hung up to dry, which caused them to undergo

further transformations such as drooping, sagging and stretching because of gravity (fig. 15).



Figure. 16, Janine Miller, work in progress, 2017, nylon stockings, a balloon, soft fibre-fill, liquid plaster, dimensions variable, photo by the artist.

When investigating the use of women's stockings and plaster to produce forms evocative of the human body, I observed that effects achieved randomly during the making, such as pendulous forms generated by gravity's pull, and drips, cracks and irregularities in the thickness of the plaster, could evoke ideas about ageing postmenopausal women's bodies. I also noted that the dried plaster forms became brittle and fragile, and I realised that I could utilise these qualities in my work to elicit ideas about old age, such as instability, fragility and impermanence. I also recognised that the hollowness of the dry forms, achieved by removing the materials stuffed into the stockings, could be utilised in my work on ageing women to represent ideas about the paradoxical interaction of presence and absence and to express the contrast between

exterior reality and interior emotional states (fig. 16).



Figure. 17, Janine Miller, *Declining to Decline*, 2017, assemblage sculpture (work in progress), nylon stockings, synthetic fibre-fill, polystyrene balls, a balloon, dimensions variable, photo by the artist.



Figure. 18, Janine Miller, *Declining to Decline*, 2017, assemblage sculpture, nylon stockings, synthetic fibre-fill, polystyrene balls, plaster, women's gold gloves, nylon hanging thread, dimensions variable, photo by the artist.

The work *Declining to Decline* (fig. 18) resulted from studio investigations aimed at developing a range of processes and effects I could

employ in my work to reference bodily senses and to relay emotional states experienced by ageing postmenopausal women. My intention was to explore the idea that, despite the physical transformations that occur as the human body ages, the third age can be a time of freedom and empowerment. The work resulted from studio experiments with women's tights stuffed with lightweight materials dipped in liquid plaster to create sculptural objects. In the finished work, the white plaster form is left untreated, to highlight surface textures created randomly during the making. The fragile, irregular surface of the work and its elongated, pendulous shape simulating the effect of gravity on the human body give the impression of deterioration, eliciting ideas about old age. At the same time however, a more positive reading of the work is also suggested by the inclusion of a pair of luminous, gold gloves on top of the plaster form, which evokes a sense of transcendence and transformation. While gloves have been used to mask the signs of ageing ([gloves.com.au](http://gloves.com.au)), and the surrealists employed them as a device to represent loss (Allmer, 2010), they can also be used as a symbol of power and social status ([gloves.com.au](http://gloves.com.au)). In *Declining to Decline*, the gold gloves deflect attention from the abstracted figure in decline. The fingers of the gloves point upward, like the wings of a bird launching itself off a ledge, eliciting ideas about the potential for women to retain their power after menopause by celebrating the freedom ageing brings. Thus, while I intended to present an embodiment of ageing that highlights the reality of the physical changes that occur in human bodies over time, the

intriguing nature of the multifaceted work provides the viewer with ever-changing and evolving possibilities, allowing them to simultaneously conceive multiple interpretations, providing pathways to new ways of thinking about the subject. The sculpture is suspended to highlight the relationship between the viewer's body and the work. Enticing the viewer to examine the work intimately at eye level enables them to have a direct engagement with the tension generated between the visceral surface textures and the different materials used, assisting them to reflect on their own ageing. In a display setting, the sculpture is illuminated to cast shadows which further the impression that the figure is transforming. The images (figs. 17-18) show the sculpture, *Declining to Decline* before being immersed in liquid plaster (fig. 17) and the completed work (fig. 18).

### 1b. Experiments with plaster to evoke old skin



Figure. 19, Janine Miller, experiment to evoke old skin, 2017, nylon stockings, balloons, soft fibre-fill, plaster, bicarbonate soda, dimensions variable, photo by the artist.

Studio explorations aimed at developing an aesthetic to communicate ideas about the effects of time on the human body were conducted through multiple iterations of tests, where other substances were added to the liquid plaster in an attempt to evoke the texture of old skin. The goal is to create surface textures that exaggerate the damage caused to human skin over time. The plan is to gild these abject visceral surfaces with metallic gold foils, to create a visual optic capable of engaging an audience in challenging negative attitudes toward mature bodies. In one trial, bicarbonate of soda was added, causing the mixture to bubble and expand. By applying this substance

thickly to the surface of the dry plaster forms I had generated with women's tights, I was able to emulate the crusty, flaky skin of old people (fig. 19).

In another test, liquid plaster was poured, plopped and dripped onto some dry plaster forms produced earlier. Then, using a straw, air was blown onto the wet plaster, causing it to flow, ripple and wrinkle like old skin. The results of this test are evident in the artwork, *Goodnight Irene* (fig. 20), which features an anthropomorphic form emerging from the drawer of an old bedside cabinet filled with recovered discarded women's jewellery. I intended to represent the idea that, despite outward appearances, older women are of value in society because they have an internal beauty acquired over their lifetimes. To evoke ideas about changing physical and psychological states I gave both objects in the work the same visceral surface texture.





Figure. 20, Janine Miller, *Goodnight Irene*, 2018, assemblage sculpture, nylon stockings, soft fibre fill, a balloon, plaster, recovered discarded gold coloured imitation jewellery, recycled bedside cabinet, dimensions variable, photo by the artist.

### 1c. Other Materials

While stockings are a central found object utilised in most works, other female fashion accessories have also been important, as is evidenced in my work, *Inside Out*.



Figure. 21, Janine Miller, *Inside Out*, 2018, assemblage sculpture, found piece of furniture, recycled dress, dimensions variable, photo by the artist.

The assemblage sculpture *Inside Out* (fig. 21) references ideas about the potential for older women to restore their lost youthful spirit. The piece is inspired by memories of my life as a young woman, when I would go out dancing and having fun with my friends and not come home till dawn. To produce the

work, I utilised a piece of broken bedroom furniture that I found by chance and recognised its potential to become artwork for the project because it evoked ideas about an older woman's damaged body. The table's drawers were missing, so I instinctively filled the void with an old dress that was stylish in the 1980's. The original plan was to elicit ideas about the implied expectation that postmenopausal women should disappear from public view. However, as I was moving the sculpture, some of the dress fabric fell out of the opening where the drawer should have been, and I recognised that I could utilise this effect to suggest that older women have the agency to escape the limited expectation of them to shape their old age in any way they see fit.

## **2. Embellishment**

Because the visible signs of ageing are associated with ugliness in society, and anti-ageing advertisements present ageing as an 'event that is located firmly at the surface level of the skin' (Searing & Zeilig, 2017 p. 30), I explored different means of embellishing the surface of my sculptures to highlight the textures I had created to evoke old skin. Anti-ageing cosmetic advertising often uses images related to luxuries, such as gold or jewellery, so I explored the potential use of alluring materials to challenge the conventional view of old skin as repulsive.



Figure. 22, Janine Miller, test piece, 2018, marbled nail enamels on nylon stockings coated with plaster, dimensions variable, photo by the artist.

The initial studio investigations tested the potential of different decorative materials, including paints, broken pieces of jewellery and glitter. I also experimented with nail enamels, using them to create marbled patterns on the surface of water, which I transferred onto small plaster forms by dipping them lightly on the surface of the water bath. While this method of decoration produced a beautiful skin-like effect, which I thought could be useful to create small areas of detail on the surface of my sculptures, it was impossible to marble larger plaster forms (fig. 22). However, as a result of this experiment I experimented with multiple flakes of different gilding foils, which when applied to the plaster forms evoked ideas of beautiful old skin (fig. 23).



Figure. 23, Janine Miller, test piece, 2018, gilded flakes of different coloured foils on nylon stockings coated with plaster (detail), photo by the artist.



Figure. 24, Janine Miller, gilding, 2018, plaster coated nylon stockings gilded with fake gold leaf, (work in progress), dimensions variable, photo by the artist.



Figure. 25, Janine Miller, *Gilded*, 2018, plaster coated nylon stockings gilded with imitation gold leaf, dimensions variable, photo by the artist.

A breakthrough moment occurred in the studio when, inspired by reading about the symbolic meanings of gold as a form of embellishment, I taught myself to gild (fig. 24-25). To test this method of decoration, I used gold leaf foils to gild some plaster objects produced previously. Reflecting upon the eye-catching effects achieved by gilding, I determined that it could be a useful device to use to attract an audience to my work, as well as posing questions about the perception of beauty, value and power of postmenopausal women.

#### **2a. Gold as a symbol of meaning**

Because of the scarcity of gold and its malleability and alluring beauty through history, gold has become a potent symbol of social and economic power and value across the world, especially in hierarchical societies.

Also, as a symbol of the sun, golden materials summon notions of potency, value and endurance, which are qualities I intend to associate with postmenopausal women in this project. Through my studio investigations, I discovered that gilding everyday materials with gold foil enhanced the perception of their value. I also learned that, because of the ability of a gilded surface to catch and reflect light, gilding is an effective way to highlight surface textures and animate forms. These findings led to the understanding that, by gilding the sculptures I produce to reference the way women's bodies change with age, I could present the idea that older women remain vibrant and active. I also recognised that I could utilise the allure of gold to challenge the widely held belief that postmenopausal women are worthless to society, by reimagining them as a valuable asset.



2b. *Golden Oldie*



Figure. 26, Janine Miller, *Golden Oldie*, 2017, assemblage sculpture, nylon stockings, a balloon, soft fibre-fill, plaster, gold leaf, red netting, hose from a domestic appliance, chair, spool of cotton, dimensions variable, photo by the artist.





Figure. 27, Janine Miller, *Golden Oldie* (detail), 2017, assemblage sculpture, nylon stockings, soft fibre-fill, a balloon, plaster, gold leaf, red netting, hose from a domestic appliance, dimensions variable, photo by the artist.

Tests conducted to explore the potential use of gold in my work resulted in the assemblage sculpture *Golden Oldie* (fig. 26-27). To produce the artwork, I used the method described earlier to generate a plaster form evocative of a woman's body transformed by time. The smooth plaster surface of the piece was disrupted by fabricating flaws such as wrinkles, cracks and lumps to elicit ideas about the skin of an old person. Gilding the work with gold leaf transformed the unappealing form into an alluring and potent object. The

purpose of this work is to extend the metaphor of the goddess to include postmenopausal women cast aside by society. The work poses questions regarding the perception of value and postmenopausal women, and suggests that, despite their outward appearance, this group of women are of importance in society because of their intrinsic worth. The reflectiveness of the gilded surface draws the viewer in close, where an indistinct reflection can provide the viewer with an intimate and ghostly encounter with their ageing, leading them to empathise with the subject. To enhance the feminine character of the work and evoke ideas of potency and vitality, I attached a swathe of red netting to the top of the sculpture and suspended the work using a pair of tights tied to a hanging wire in a shape that alludes to a raised fist clenched defiantly.

In this work I intend to present the idea that, as postmenopausal women are freed from their role as homemaker, they can explore new realms. I communicate this concept by utilising recovered pieces of hosing from a domestic appliance to generate a component of a semi-figurative form. Using this material in its original state in the work allows me to evoke ideas of corporeality by alluding to notions of a spine winding downward to end in the foot of a stocking placed on an unstable chair. However, it also functions symbolically to challenge old paradigms about women. The aim is to suggest an analogy between the traditional function of tubing as a flexible conduit of matter and the potential for postmenopausal women today to break from past

traditions by being open to new conceptions of ageing, and by being willing to reinvent themselves as they grow old. Another feature of the work is its illusion of precariousness, which is evoked by the dynamic arrangement of different elements. The intention is to trigger the viewer's curiosity by referencing the contradictory nature of ageing for women, which Simone de Beauvoir described so succinctly when she wrote:

The woman who 'never felt so young in her life' and who has never seen herself so old does not succeed in reconciling these two aspects of herself (de Beauvoir, 1997, p. 592).

2c. *Old Gold*



Figure. 28, Janine Miller, *Old Gold*, 2018, assemblage sculpture, nylon stockings, plaster, red netting, found objects, recycled table, dimensions variable, photo by the artist.

In the larger-scaled work, *Old Gold* (fig. 28), I intended to create a compelling visual optic to attract an audience to the work, to lead them to reflect on the notion that the third and fourth chapters in life are a continuation of growth. The glimmering, gilded, golden forms also allow the viewer to consider the idea that older women discarded by society are precious. The work

comprises a proliferation of bulbous, hollow plaster forms of different shapes and sizes. The perplexing forms evoke thoughts about the diversity of old women's bodies, but can also be interpreted as empty seedpods or the hard-outer casings that once housed the chrysalises of butterflies. I arranged the gilded forms in a precarious heap on top of a table painted white, to summon the idea of a pile of discarded things. The legs of the table have been lopped off to make it look like it is sinking into the floor, alluding to ideas about the passing of time and also allowing the form to be interpreted in different ways, such as a bed or a coffin. In the artwork, the golden coloured semi-abstract figurative shapes are juxtaposed with real things symbolic of femininity, such as a swathe of red netting and a red stocking. The aim is to ground the work in reality and to provide clues about its meaning. When generating the artwork, I used dualities such as presence and absence, glorious and abject and valuable and worthless to upset the viewer's expectations and to trigger a sensory response to force them to reconsider their attitude toward ageing postmenopausal women. The empty void also acts as a reminder that empowerment in the third and fourth age can be achieved by leaving the past behind to embark on new adventures.

## 2d. Red as a symbol of meaning



Figure. 29, Janine Miller, *There's Life in The Old Girl Yet*, 2018, *assemblage sculpture*, nylon stockings, soft fibre-fill, a balloon, plaster, hose from a domestic appliance, shoes, red paint, gilded metallic foils, dimensions variable, photo by the artist.

The use of red materials, evident in my work *Golden Oldie* (fig. 26-27) and *Old Gold*, is a recurring feature throughout a number of my works for the project. I use the colour red to evoke contradictory ideas about the ageing process. This is exemplified in my work *There's Life in the Old Girl Yet* (fig. 29). In this work, the unexpected combination of materials and the suggestion of a fragmented body prevents the viewer from focusing on any one part of the work, thus evoking ideas of nonconformity, freedom and possibility. The work comprises a hand-generated, hollow, bulbous object with two arching limb-like

shapes forming a base. I hand-crafted this element by inserting an inflated balloon and soft fibrous material into a pair of women's stockings before dipping them in a bath of liquid plaster. When the resulting object had dried, I painted it red and gilded it with gold leaf. The purpose of decorating the form with gold was to allude to alchemic notions of transformation and change. Two pieces of flexible washing machine hose inserted into a pair of red nylon stockings have been attached to the limbs of the plaster piece to extend their shape. I intend the red stockings to promote the idea that, rather than an automatic decline, growing old can be a continuation of energy and power.

The use of vibrant red in the work provides visual impact, engaging the viewer and leading their eyes on a journey over the form. Suggestive of the vital inner life force that allows postmenopausal women to retain their personal power despite the challenges physical ageing brings, it also references notions about the enduring power of the sex component of our psyche even as we grow old and become asexual in appearance.

Another feature of the work, *There's Life in the Old Girl Yet*, is its curvaceous form produced by twisting the flexible hose inside the red stockings and by stretching the elastic stocking material tight. These actions enabled me to create taut, linear forms which give the work a tension that summons the idea that something is transforming. This idea is enriched by an interweaving of interior and exterior, produced by the transparency of the stretched stockings which allows the viewer to see the objects inserted into them.

While the spiralling shapes generated by curling the pieces of hose evoke the idea of movement and continual change, the shape and texture of hosing also call to mind a range of other concepts. The function of washing machine tubes as a device to transport material from one place to another act as a symbol of meaning in the work, to suggest that negative ideas about postmenopausal women are not fixed and can be changed. Also, identifiable through the translucent red stocking material, the rib-like structure of the pieces of hosing could also reference an x-ray of the human body, the veins of the human circulatory system, or the fragile thinning skeletal structure of an ageing person.



Figure. 30, Janine Miller, *There's Life in The Old Girl Yet* (detail), 2018, assemblage sculpture, nylon stockings, soft fibre-fill, plaster, hose from a domestic appliance, women's shoes, gilded metallic foils, dimensions variable, photo by the artist.

In the work, I stuffed the feet of the stockings with soft fibre-fill and covered them with liquid plaster to evoke ideas about the distorted feet of old



women (fig. 30). At the same time, however, the gold women's shoes into which the feet are stuffed prompt ideas about value. These contradictions are also evident in the surface treatment of the gold form, whereby blowing on the surface of the wet plaster with a straw enabled me to mimic the effects of old skin. To emphasise notions of an old body, I decorated the forms by gilding them with flakes of different coloured metallic foils, resulting in a mottled effect which summons the idea of old skin – but, at the same time, the luminous pattern is suggestive of beauty.

Displaying the work *There's Life in the Old Girl Yet*, on top of a table is a rebellious act designed to promote alternative ways of thinking about ageing. Through this enigmatic form, I sought to create an element of surprise to activate the viewer's creative thinking. By combining unexpected materials, I intend to encourage the viewer to make connections between objects that may shift and change as their imagination is triggered.

## 2e. Other decorative materials



Figure. 31, Janine Miller, *Give me a minute to fix my face* (detail), 2018, assemblage sculpture, nylon stockings, soft fibre-fill, plaster, imitation gold, silver and mixed metallic foils, mirror pieces, false eyelashes, broken pieces of jewellery, dimensions variable, photo by the artist.



Figure. 32, Janine Miller, *Give me a minute to fix my face* (detail), 2018, nylon stockings, soft fibre-fill, plaster, a piece of hose from a domestic appliance, imitation gold, silver and mixed metallic foils, fibrefill, decorative objects, dimensions variable, photo by the artist.

A series of tests was also conducted to examine the potential use of other decorative materials, including recovered cast-off items of jewellery. The purpose was to see if an aesthetic could be developed to evoke ideas about the contradictory nature of ageing as it concerns postmenopausal women. The concept stemmed from a reflection on the convention in society to celebrate youthful bodies while discriminating against older people because of the way they look. Women past their childbearing age who choose to grow old without altering their appearance often experience social exclusion because they are

perceived to have 'let themselves go'. At the same time, older women experience social ostracism if they over-use cosmetics to mask their age. Examples include women who decorate their face with the same eye-catching make-up they used to attract attention when they were young, but who fail to recognise that on the skin of older women these same colours have a garish effect. Similarly, older women who use a lipstick pencil to enlarge the contour of their thin lips to create the illusion of a youthful pout, which instead makes themselves look clownish. Another illustration is older women who apply thick layers of makeup to their face to try to mask flaws in their skin, but which instead highlights the signs of ageing and results in them looking like a caricature of their former selves. Additionally, some women use cosmetics to successfully create the illusion of a youthful face, only to have their body reveal their age, thus attracting ridicule and prompting comments such as "she looks like mutton dressed up as lamb". While postmenopausal women are expected to conform to implied gender-based social codes concerning their ageing, men can grow old with few expectations regarding their appearance.

Inspired by Cindy Sherman's portrayal of older women who use makeup in extreme ways to maintain the illusion of a youthful appearance, I produced an assemblage sculpture titled *Give me a minute to fix my face* (fig. 31-32). To begin the work, I once again generated a plaster form by dipping women's stockings filled with lightweight materials into some liquid plaster. I

then transformed the resulting object into a mask-like face by embellishing it with things traditionally associated with the daily rituals undertaken by women to enhance their appearance. These items included imitation jewels, pieces of broken mirror and reclaimed cast-off women's adornments. I aimed to magnify the visual effect created when older women use too much makeup on their face to appear youthful. By utilising imitation materials in the work, such as, gold leaf and fake jewels, my objective was to highlight the way older women feel compelled to manufacture a false illusion of beauty to remain relevant in society. To display the sculpture, I hung it at a height to ensure the embellished mask-like form was at eye level. Mirror pieces were included to allow the viewer to observe themselves examining the work. I intended to make sure the viewer could examine the artwork at close range, to allow them to see themselves reflected in the artwork, prompting empathy for the subject.

To emphasise ideas about the contradictory nature of ageing for postmenopausal women, I attached pendulous, drooping forms – made by filling women's stockings with luminous flakes of metallic gold and silver gilding foils – to the decorative mask-like object. The aim was to summon notions about the transformations caused by gravity in ageing human bodies while, at the same time, eliciting ideas about the intrinsic value of older women.

## 2f. Making beautiful blemishes



Figure. 33, Janine Miller, 2018, test sheet, individual decorative encrustations, gel medium, imitation gems, gold glitter on acetate sheet, dimensions variable, photo by the artist.



Figure. 34, Janine Miller, *Beauty Lies*, 2018, assemblage sculpture, plaster, nylon stockings, balloons, soft fibre-fill, fake jewels, glitter, imitation gold leaf, women's retro gloves, found chair, white gesso paint, dimensions variable, photo by the artist.



Studio explorations were also conducted to see if I could make unique items of embellishment that could be applied to the surface of the abstract figurative sculptures to evoke ideas about the blotches and strange growths that appear on the skin of people after mid-life. Liquid gel medium and loose imitation gems were used to make the individual blemishes (fig. 33). The gel was poured onto a sheet of acetate, forming small organic shapes, before the fake jewels were embedded into it. Fine glitter was then sprinkled over the shapes, adhering to the gel. When the glittering encrustations had dried, they were removed from the acetate sheet using a craft knife as if it was a spatula. When I applied the glittering blobs of textured embellishment to the smooth surface of a gilded sculpture, they evoked ideas of scabby old skin and also added interest and intrigue to the work. The use of individual textured effects can be seen in the work, *Beauty Lies* (fig. 34). The assemblage sculpture features a gilded abstract figurative form with thin, misshapen chicken-like legs and large bulbous forms where the feet should be. Scattered randomly over the surface of this strange anthropomorphic form are patches of beaded encrustations, eliciting ideas of the crusty skin of old people. By presenting the idea that the damaged old skin of older people is beautiful, my intention is to upset the viewer's expectations, to force them to rethink their attitude toward old bodies.





Figure. 35, Janine Miller, initial stage of the work *Beauty Lies*, 2017, soft form comprising nylon stockings, balloons, soft fibre-fill, dimensions variable, photo by the artist.



Figure. 36, Janine Miller, stage two of the production of the work *Beauty Lies*, 2017, plaster coated nylon stockings, balloons, soft fibre-fill, dimensions variable, photo by the artist.

The work *Beauty Lies* (fig. 34) is an archetype of the way I have generated perplexing and humorous forms for the project, to encourage the viewer to engage with the work to discover its meaning. It contains a darkly comic element which is also evident in a number of my other works. This humorous element first emerged accidentally during initial studio investigations of the potential of women's tights and plaster to generate forms evocative of the human body transforming with age. The images (fig. 35-36) show two early stages in the production of *Beauty Lies*. Figure 35 reveals knots tied in the corset of the tights, and balloons inserted in the feet. Figure 36 shows a solid-looking form, with a comic character that resulted when the soft sculptural form was immersed in liquid plaster and hung up to dry allowing gravity to affect its shape. This unintentional comic element reflects a cheekiness which adds to the sense of older women refusing to acquiesce to the expectations and judgements placed on them.

Emphasising the strangeness of the finished object is its precarious placement on the seat of the chair, summoning the notion that it is in a state of limbo. While the gold orbs at one end of the sculpture seem to weigh it down, this effect is counterbalanced by the image of the silver gloved hands shooting upwards through the curved arm-like back of the chair. The intention was to create a see-saw-like tension, to elicit the notion of a rise and fall. The chair upon which the embellished plaster form rests has a black vinyl seat and front legs shaped like the feet of a giant bird with powerful talons, suggestive of

masculine power and the patriarchal authority women can liberate themselves from as they age after menopause. In this work, I intended to present the idea that, while the highly prized attributes of youth, such as beauty, power and prestige inevitably fall away, their loss can be transcended by exploring new horizons.

The sculptural works described in this chapter, which will form my exhibition submission, evidence how the extensive studio investigations I conducted to trial different ways I could re-purpose objects and materials connected with women's lives to make artworks for the project resulted in an array of unique techniques I could employ in my work. The multidimensional character of the assemblage sculptures I have generated can engage an audience in different ways, leading the viewer to re-evaluate their attitude towards postmenopausal women.

## Conclusion

This studio-based research project investigated how negative attitudes surrounding postmenopausal womanhood could be challenged through contemporary sculptural forms. I began the project by identifying that the reason postmenopausal women are treated disrespectfully in the community is due to the longstanding tradition in western society of viewing the role of women primarily through their usefulness as child bearers, homemakers and objects for the pleasure of men. When these roles have been fulfilled, postmenopausal women are considered valueless and are cast aside.

Examining contemporary theories on human ageing enabled me to build a case to challenge this old paradigm. Modern scholars and feminist thinkers unanimously dispute the widely held belief that life after middle age represents an inescapable decline. They put forward the idea that, by maintaining healthy lifestyles, the third age can be as rewarding as any other stage in the life course. Feminist theorists on ageing, including Betty Friedan, Margaret Morganroth Gullett and Linn Sandberg, call upon older women to challenge the negative perception of life after menopause by embracing self-determination and celebrating the opportunity ageing offers to experience life differently (Sandberg 2013).

Drawing inspiration from the visionary ideas of contemporary feminist writers, and also from female artists who have created work which

defies stereotyping of women – including Alice Neel, Alice Mackler, Cindy Sherman, the female Surrealists, Meret Oppenheim, Aileen Agar and Dorothea Tanning, and also Louise Bourgeois and Lynda Benglis – I devised a plan to generate a series of feminist-inspired sculptural assemblages to reimagine postmenopausal women.

While many women artists have generated artwork in defiance of conventional expectations of older women, relatively little attention has been paid to the depiction of older women. My work, along with only a small number of other artists, directly challenges stereotypical representations of postmenopausal women.

To make the work, I used the human figure as a central motif and employed recovered objects and materials cast off by women as they age, including items of hosiery, imitation jewellery, wardrobe accessories such as a wig, gloves, shoes and pieces of domestic furniture. The intention was to ground the work firmly in reality and to provide the viewer with clues about its meaning. Many of the retrieved objects were worn and damaged, revealing their history, and I used them as symbols to assist me in constructing the ageing narrative. To achieve the objective of reimagining postmenopausal women, I restored life to the reclaimed cast-off objects and materials by transforming them into new forms, using simple sculptural processes and methods of assemblage. I developed a technique whereby I filled women's stockings with lightweight materials, including inflated balloons, polystyrene shapes and soft fibre-fill,

before immersing the resulting soft forms in liquid plaster and hanging them up to dry where the effects of gravity further altered them. The mysterious anthropomorphic forms that resulted from this process exhibited exaggerated physical characteristics evocative of the transformations that take place in human bodies because of ageing. Features included pendulous shapes that elicit ideas of the body parts of older women affected by gravity, and uneven forms which were fragile and prone to cracking and ruptures in the same way that old bodies are weak. I decorated these visceral forms with illuminative materials, such as glitter and fake gold - and silver-metallic foils, to enhance these imperfections. By embellishing the flawed, broken and damaged structures, I had produced using women's stockings and liquid plaster, I reimagined postmenopausal women as beautiful and valuable.

Utilising the surrealist strategy of juxtaposition, I used both hand-generated and found objects and materials to make a series of strange sculptural assemblages with an uncompromisingly feminine character. The intention was to challenge the conventional view of postmenopausal women as sexless, worthless, dull, weak and irrelevant, by producing work that represents older women as alluring, valuable, interesting and vital. Employing methods of assemblage to generate the work, with all the inventive possibilities this method affords, enabled me to utilise a range of materials and techniques to reimage older women as complex, flexible, adaptable, resilient, intelligent

and funny. The eccentric character of the body of work I produced challenges postmenopausal women to face their fears and to take risks as they age. The work also promotes the idea that older women can liberate themselves from old patriarchal traditions by transgressing conventional social expectations, such as the implied requirement of older women to dress down and gradually disappear from public view. It suggests that postmenopausal women can retain their place in the community as they age, by embracing self-determination and by challenging unfair expectations of them. Furthermore, the improvisational nature of the work suggests that, as postmenopausal women age they can reinvent themselves to embody old age in any way they see fit.

In conclusion, the visually compelling and intriguing nature of the feminist-inspired work I have produced in the project is designed to challenge the observer's understanding of postmenopausal women. It seeks to elicit empathy rather than confrontation, through the employment of enigmatic and alluring forms which carry with them an undercurrent of dark humour. The contradictory nature of the work promotes a discussion about this important but neglected social issue, leading to the possibility of a new appreciation of the value of postmenopausal women in society.

At the same time as this project has helped me to understand my experiences as an older woman and given me greater insight into the challenges faced by my ageing mother and other women with whom I am acquainted, it

has also enabled me to place these experiences in a broader social and cultural context.

While my work in this project has deepened my understanding of the critical issues surrounding the way postmenopausal women age today, in future work the scope of enquiry could be expanded to include the investigation of the experiences of a broader range of women. A wide-ranging approach would enable me to build a bigger picture and to identify gaps in my work.



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